HAVEN’T HEARD OF ECRM’S ANNUAL GLOBAL WINE, BEER & SPIRITS EXPO? YOU’RE NOT ALONE. WHEN THE TASTING PANEL WAS APPROACHED TO BE THE OFFICIAL MEDIA SPONSOR FOR THE 2012 SHOW, WE HADN’T HEARD OF THIS INDUSTRY-DRIVEN MEETINGPLACE, WHEREIN BUYERS AND SUPPLIERS HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO MEET FACE-TO-FACE IN A SERIES OF INTIMATE MEETINGS SCHEDULED OVER THE COURSE OF THREE DAYS.

But as we watched our first ECRM meeting unfold, we were impressed. From buyers returning year after year to discover new brands, to suppliers in all segments of the industry coming together to discuss strategy, we discovered that the ECRM Global Wine, Beer & Spirits event is the industry’s best-kept secret, an event that offers quality facetime that’s at a premium in our increasingly digital world.

Unlike other large industry-driven conventions, where endless ballrooms are filled with row upon row of branded booths, ECRM’s unique intimacy offers suppliers a chance to showcase their hottest products and gives buyers the opportunity to really understand a brand’s personality.

Sheila Carey, Wine Buyer for Denver’s Argonaut Wine & Liquor, who has attended the meetings for the past three years, agrees: “Seeing everyone one-on-one is great. It’s an incredible relationship-building opportunity, where you can build a relationship with a buyer here, and then when they’ve got new products, they’ll come back and call me.”

Chimes in Derrick Gus, Director of Sourcing and Procurement for Walt Disney Parks and Resorts (if it’s in the U.S. and it’s liquid, Gus has picked it), “Coming to these meetings gives me invaluable time with the suppliers. I rely on supplier relationship management so much, and the more I can bring the suppliers into my world in these intimate chats, the more we can build our businesses together.”

With the buyers pleased at the opportuni-
PANEL’s Publisher/Executive Editor Meridith May (see sidebar), to communal meals wherein mingling is encouraged and impromptu meetings take place over an impressive spread (half of these interviews may or may not have been conducted near a cheese platter), ECRM is a social environment where those who work hard can also play hard.

Culminating in a walk-around Grand Tasting wherein wine, beer and spirit suppliers pulled out all the stops to showcase their wares, THE TASTING PANEL was also proud to sponsor the first-ever ECRM Grand Tasting Awards, which shone a spotlight on some of the favorite and most innovative products in the industry today (see pages 64-65 for full results).

This may have been our first trip to ECRM, but it won’t be our last: Next year, make sure you’re there too. Stay tuned to THE TASTING PANEL and www.ecrm.marketgate.com for updates on the 2013 show.

For the first time, the 2012 ECRM was also host to an exclusive roundtable inviting a handful of buyers, suppliers and innovators in our industry a chance to discuss the state of the wine and spirits business, from distribution tactics, to the impact of social media. THE TASTING PANEL’s Meridith May, who acted as moderator for the panel, explained, “We wanted to find a reason to bring brands and buyers together in the pages of the magazine, and this conference is the perfect opportunity to do that.” Here are some of the highlights:

**On building an artisan portfolio:**
“We’re seeing a lot more emphasis on artisan spirits now. We try to find brands that have a reason to be, not just to fit some category. Coming to market with a liquid that is great is not enough—we have to be creative in terms of how we get our brands to market.”

—Smoke Wallin, CEO, Paddington Brands, whose Napa Smith Brewery has had a great impact on the craft beer segment

“The craft movement is so hot, and with technology, the world is much smaller. We tend to look for brands that tell a story and represent a region, because people want something fresh and new.”

—Ryan Heilig, VP Operations, G.K. Skaggs, Inc., which strives to bring new and interesting wines to the U.S. market

**On crafting a focused, diverse wine list:**
“As soon as they start talking scores, I stop listening. I’m much more interested in the heritage and quality of wines than a number.”

—Stuart Roy, National Director, Wine and Spirits, Smith & Wollensky Restaurant Group

“The adult experience is a by-product of the overall experience, so we try to stay focused on a theme and stock items that would be difficult for guests to track down in their home town.”

—Derrick Gus, Director of Sourcing and Procurement, Walt Disney Parks and Resorts

**On distributor/supplier relationships:**
“Our job as suppliers is to catch the eye of the distributor. Our job is to create something fun and unique that the distributor can get behind and support.”

—Tom Conte, National Sales Manager, Serralles USA

“The biggest issue to buyers and suppliers in the industry today is the second tier, which controls the flow and pricing of products.”

—Douglas Due, President and CEO, DA Due Compliance and Logistics, a clearing distributor that can move product within California for as little as five cents/case
With each attending supplier entering a product to be tasted by our esteemed panel of judges, there were plenty of reasons to celebrate the closing Grand Tasting. It was a tough call with many wonderful wines and spirits tasted, but here’s a look at the products that really knocked our socks off.

**BEST NEW PRODUCT**

**GOLD: Be-Tini, Sour Apple**
One of the most surprising finds of the year, the apple base is authentic enough to believe it was just poured from the local juice bar. Clean, refreshingly tart and bright: a superb cocktail partner!

**SALVETO IMPORTS**
Currently seeking national distributor network partner opportunities. Please contact Patrick McNamara at Patrick@SalvetoImports.us.

**SILVER: Epica Red Wine, Chile**
A blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Carménère and Syrah, this sumptuous New World wine melds cherry, sweet tobacco and cocoa with a bold entry and a full body. Great value.

**SHAW-ROSS INTERNATIONAL IMPORTERS**

**BEST MARKETING VISION**

**GOLD: Goose Bump 2010 Velvety Red, Sicily**
The concept is appealing and fresh, and the wine rich with soil and sunshine, with high fruit tones. The “Velvety” name and the textural goose bump reference sold our judges on the special vision for possible POS, editorial and P.R. outreach. The sophisticated liquid inside the bottle sealed the deal.

**PRESTIGE WINE IMPORTS**

**SILVER: John Henry “3 Lick Spiker” Ale**
Aged on bourbon oak chips, this imperial stout is brewed with three different dark roasted malts. We loved the chocolate and hops profile, with a back-up full aroma of coffee, caramel and oats. It’s a big beer with an amusing name in the age of the microbrew.

**COLD SPRING BREWING**
**CATEGORY FLAVOR INNOVATION**

**GOLD: Gosling’s Dark ’n Stormy in a Can**
A delicious ready-to-drink cocktail—and ginger beer—in a can. Spicy, zingy and surprisingly pleasing. These guys make the process easy.  
CASTLE BRANDS

**SILVER: Almond Roca Cream**
A gorgeous array of flavors stream through this liquid confection, produced by the Chocolate Shop Winery in Walla Walla, Washington. Indulgent, with natural almond and toffee flavors, melding with a base of subtle cocoa.  
PRECEPT WINE

**BEST PACKAGING**

**GOLD: Dos Armadillos**
A seasoned glass design depicting the natural stance of the armadillo, each bottle is a singular piece of art, handcrafted and hand-painted. The fiber on the neck is made from agave plants. The techniques are masterful—a look back at pottery and glass artisans of the ancient past.  
INTERNATIONAL PREMIUM SPIRITS (IMPORTED BY FOURCADE & HECHT)
For what’s inside the bottle, see Meridith May’s review on page 57.

**SILVER: Purple Cowboy 2010 Tenacious Red, Paso Robles**
This ultra-exciting and Western-design label reigned us in at first sight. Founded by Terry Wheathley, whose husband and son are rodeo cowboys, this authentic label says a lot about true grit. Oh, and we loved the Cabernet-Syrah inside the bottle: purple flowers and dusty blackberries lined our mouths—the finish lasts more than eight seconds! Enjoyed the ride.  
CANOPY MANAGEMENT

**ESTABLISHED BRAND OF HONOR**

**GOLD: Cognac Park Vieille Fine XO Champagne**
Leather and spice define the richness and roundness of this heady, voluptuous and potent spirit. Piquant flavors of peaches and apricot, floating on a bed of caramel.  
DISTILLERIE TESSENDIER & FILS (IMPORTED BY FOURCADE & HECHT)

**SILVER: Cline 2010 Ancient Vines Mourvèdre, Contra Costa County**
Dark plum and darker, bittersweet chocolate dominate, while a eucalyptus astringency dries the palate until the parade of dark plum and chocolate return, once again. A tribute to this Rhône varietal from a winery with a long history.  
CLINE CELLARS

**THE TASTING PANEL**

**AWARD OF EXCELLENCE**

**Ataulfos 2008 Jiménez-Landi, Mentrída, Spain**
Violets climb the walls of gripping, chalky tannins. They beat you up and then love you, with a finish of bright, strawberry compote. Compelling and modern.  
ERIC SOLOMON SELECTIONS

**Trivento 2011 Malbec Reserve, Mendoza, Argentina**
Mouth-filling, curvy-round and concentrated: black tea and blackberry surround a core of coffee and dark chocolate.  
BANFI VINTNERS

**Don Q Gran Añejo Rum**
This Puerto Rican rum speaks of rancio and sweet peach, which when combined bring the past to the present. Dried apricots and pralines bring harmony to a richly rewarding sweet-and-dry finish.  
SERRALLES USA